DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 418 089 SP 037 881

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TITLE Portfolio Analysis: A Survey of Teacher Attitudes and Knowledge.
PUB DATE 1996-11-00
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the College Reading Association (November 1996).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Elementary Education; Evaluation Methods; Intermediate Grades; Junior High Schools; *Language Arts; Middle Schools; *Portfolio Assessment; Reading Skills; Secondary School Teachers; *Student Evaluation; *Teacher Attitudes
IDENTIFIERS Memphis City Schools TN; Shelby County Schools TN; *Teacher Knowledge

ABSTRACT

This study evaluated teachers' attitudes toward, reactions to, and knowledge of using portfolios in language arts classrooms. In May 1996, sixth, seventh, and eighth grade teachers in city and county public schools in Memphis, Tennessee, completed a 14-item questionnaire that asked: (1) if they currently used portfolios in evaluating language arts and reading skills, (2) what training they had received in portfolio use, and (3) problems they foresaw in using portfolios. The questionnaire also asked teachers to agree or disagree with several statements about portfolios and their uses. Finally, the questionnaire asked teachers to provide information on years of teaching experience and highest level of education completed. Data analysis indicated that only 24 percent of the respondents currently used portfolios in their classes, and 57 percent had no training in portfolios use. A total of 70 percent agreed that portfolios produced more representative pictures of student abilities than standardized tests. Half of the teachers agreed that using portfolios would increase students' skill levels in reading and language arts. Most teachers agreed that there needs to be more teacher training to explain portfolios' functions and benefits. Problems teachers foresaw in portfolio use included assigning grades to portfolios, allotting time to efficiently using portfolios, and keeping paperwork organized. Two appendixes present the questionnaire and a table with survey results. (Contains 14 references.) (SM)

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Portfolio Analysis:
A Survey of Teacher Attitudes and Knowledge

Thomas L. Starck

Research Residency Prospectus
for the
Department of Instruction and Curriculum Leadership

Portfolio Analysis

T Starck

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Portfolio Analysis: A Survey of Teacher Attitudes and Knowledge

ABSTRACT

The purpose of a language arts portfolio is to provide a showplace for students to display their ideas, thoughts and skill development. This example of authentic assessment provides student, teacher and parents with a much more vivid picture of performance and progress than mere standardized tests. Why then are teachers not actively using portfolios in classrooms? The present study was designed to evaluate teacher's attitude towards, reactions to and knowledge of using portfolios in their classrooms. The thirty seven teachers questioned were chosen at random from a large metropolitan school district. The teachers responded to twelve research items presented in a questionnaire. Scores indicate that only twenty four percent currently use portfolios in their classes. Fifty seven percent of the teachers had no training in using portfolios.

INTRODUCTION

On the cutting edge of assessment in language and reading development is the use of student portfolios in the classroom. Over the past several years, the results of numerous studies on portfolios have presented guiding principles for using portfolios, contents to be included in the portfolios, the use of portfolios in administering assessment and problems associated with the use of portfolios. However, studies and research suggest that little has been done evaluating awareness, reactions and feelings of educators who use, or may plan to use portfolios. Briefly outlined within this prospectus is a definition of portfolios, contents which should be included in a portfolio, how portfolios relate to assessment, how portfolios compare to traditional methods of assessment and some results of prior studies.

Typically one thinks of a portfolio as having practical applications in the professions of artists, models, or photographers showcasing their achievements (Johns & VanLeirsburg, 1992). There is a trend in education towards more authentic types of assessment, such as student portfolios. Similar to professional portfolios, a student portfolio lends itself as a medium for expression, learning and assessment. A student portfolio is a collection of materials both assigned by the teacher and self selected by the student.

Products recommended for inclusion consist of samples of reading and writing performance, reading notes, rough drafts, memos, final drafts, published versions, journals and collaborative projects (Calfee & Perfumo, 1993). Audio tapes, photographs, reading lists, writing samples, checklists of reading behaviors, student self evaluations, teacher observations, tests, and informal reading inventories may also be included (Johns & VanLeirsburg, 1992). These materials are put into the portfolio by the student and the teacher. The portfolio container is loosely defined and may be a folder, bag or notebook. In other words, the portfolio is a repertoire of a student's thoughts, ideas, language-related growth and accomplishment (Farr & Tone, 1993).

Quality assessment is essential in teaching reading because teachers need meaningful information on which to base instructional decisions. Portfolio assessment provides a fundamental picture of student growth in relation to the curriculum ("Portfolios Illuminate," 1990). By using portfolios teachers can assess their student's progress one week or several weeks at a time. This proves to be a valuable tool in relation to curriculum planning. Many types of assessment are available, but formal assessments limit teachers in making instructional decisions. Interestingly enough, standardized tests are more common in elementary reading and language arts than in the content areas (Calfee & Perfumo, 1993). These formal assessments determine a student's progress

in relation to grade level or other students. They don't, however, provide prompt feedback which is necessary for continuous academic growth ("Portfolios Illuminate," 1990). A standardized test may report progress every six weeks or at the end of the year, but it does not provide the immediate response that a portfolio can give. According to Farr (1991), the use of portfolios provides an opportunity for richer, more authentic and valid assessment of student performance and progress. As opposed to simply selecting an answer on a standardized test, students must produce authentic products and materials in a portfolio to demonstrate their competence, creativity and learning (Calfee & Perfumo, 1993). Another assessment issue regarding portfolios is that they allow learners to become assessors and evaluators of their own work. This is an effective means for developing self concept, motivation and confidence in students. Interest in learning is promoted by being able to include projects and writings that are chosen by the student (Valencia, 1990). This type of evaluation helps students develop a lifetime of self-assessment in learning and individual growth.

During the past several years, research has supported the notion that portfolio assessments provide a truer and more valid measurement of student achievement in language and reading development compared to mere standard and quantitative methods of assessment (Valencia, 1990). However, a 1992 study, by Johns and VanLeirsburg confirmed that of 173 teacher participants surveyed, 130 had not used portfolios and only 43 did have some

experience with portfolios. This raises the question of why teachers are not using portfolios. The study also points out that little has been reported on reactions and feelings of educators who use or plan to use portfolios. Studies by Calfee and Perfumo (1993) presented themes centered around the future of portfolio analysis and assessment and the need for a stronger foundation to support portfolio use. Although Calfee and Perfumo are strong advocates of portfolio use, they point out that perhaps teachers lack the background knowledge and training to implement portfolios. These studies indicate that although portfolios provide a better indicator of achievement and assessment, their implementation in the classroom is limited by outside factors. In an effort to validate prior research, the purpose of this study is to assess teacher's attitudes towards, reactions to and knowledge of using portfolio analysis and assessment in their classrooms. Answers regarding a portfolio definition, teacher attitudes, teacher training, current assessment techniques, and possible problems of using portfolios will be assessed, in an effort to identify factors causing problems implementing portfolio use.

METHODOLOGY

The participants in this study will be forty teachers in the middle grades (grades 6, 7 and 8), chosen randomly, in city and county public schools in Memphis, Tennessee. A letter will accompany the questionnaire stating its purpose and requesting permission from the principal to administer the questionnaire. The questionnaire will contain nine Likert-type questions and five open ended questions. The Likert questions attempt to evaluate teacher attitudes and knowledge regarding portfolios. The open ended questions deal with what teachers believe should be in a portfolio, teacher training, problems using portfolios, number of years teaching experience and highest level of education completed. The teachers will complete a fourteen item questionnaire. The questionnaire is designed to evaluate teacher attitudes, awareness and knowledge regarding portfolios. Before administering the questionnaire, it will be piloted by a similar methodology as the formal study. Refer to the appendix for a sample of the questionnaire.

All data will be collected in May, 1996 at the convenience of the classroom teachers involved. The questionnaire will be delivered by hand to the appropriate school and also later retrieved in person by the researcher. Data will be analyzed by frequency distribution and by measures of central tendency. The final product summarizing

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the findings of this study will be in the form of an article sent to a peer reviewed journal and presented at the College Reading Association Conference in October of 1996. The study will serve as a pilot study for a future research project.

RESULTS

The following two diagrams are a demographic overview of the 37 participants by years of experience and level of education.

Diagram 1
Years of Teaching Experience

0-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16 + years
21	5	3	8

Diagram 2
Level of Education

B.A.	MASTERS	M.A. + 45	DOCTORAL
21	14	1	1

Participants were asked if they currently used portfolios in the evaluation of language arts and reading skills. Of the thirty seven participants who responded, 24.3% did use portfolios and 75.7% did not use them. Thirty teachers either strongly agreed or agreed that included in a definition of portfolio is that they are used to showcase

achievement, build self concept and help to broaden the learning experience of a student. Six teachers were undecided on a definition of portfolios.

Questions #2, #3 and #4 on the questionnaire dealt with teacher attitudes towards portfolios. 70% agreed that portfolios produce a more representative picture of a student's abilities than using standardized tests. Half of the teachers agreed that using portfolios would increase skill levels of students in reading and language arts. Sixteen teachers, or 43%, were undecided regarding the latter issue. 77% of the teachers agreed in question #4 that students would develop a more positive attitude about reading and writing by developing an individual portfolio. Questions #5 and #6 address what type of assessment techniques teachers currently use in their classrooms. Question #5 reports that slightly more than half of the participants use assessment other than formal standardized tests. 78% agree in question #6 that they use teacher made or publisher made tests. Thirty three teachers (89%) agree in question #8 that there needs to be more teacher training to explain how portfolios work and how they may benefit students. A complete list of the questions and a frequency distribution can be found in Appendix 1.

Question #10 dealt with what teachers believed should be contained in a language arts portfolio. The most frequent response, broadly defined as writing samples, was written in the open ended question by twelve of the participants. The second most frequent response was to include reading tests in the portfolio. This was addressed by six of the participants. In descending frequency, other items included:

-creative projects covering all subject areas
-teacher evaluations
-journals
-artwork
-student's best work
-poetry
-creative writing
-essays
-book reports
-rough drafts of work
-reading program data
-a list of books read
-ideas for future work
-classwork
-special projects
-student self evaluations
-music
-standardized tests
-biographies
-personal writings
-awards/certificates
-reading/writing interest scale
-student picture

Question #11 reported that only 43% of teacher participants have had any training in the use of portfolios. Question #12 was an open ended question dealing with what problems the teacher might foresee if they used portfolios in their class. Above all, the highest ranking answer to this question was the task of assigning a grade to portfolios. Allotting time to effeiciently use portfolios was the second most frequent problem among teacher concern. Keeping portfolios organized, finding a place to store them and excessive paperwork all ranked as the third most anticipated problem with using portfolios.

Other problem areas included: defining goals clearly, motivating students, children losing portfolios and explaining them to parents.

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of our questionnaire there seem to be a high percent of teachers who believe using portfolios presents a more representative picture of a student's abilities than standardized testing. Again, the consensus leads to the conclusion that teachers want more training on portfolio use. Prior studies which obtained information on contents within each portfolio is validated by our research. We point out that because of so few of our participants actually use portfolios and have had little training that their answer regarding contents is limited by lack of use and training. The top problems listed by the participants of our study, which included grading, time and organization are also consistent with other studies on portfolio use.

The similarities in the research regarding problems associated with implementing portfolios speak to higher educational professionals and school administrators who must work to alleviate the problems, either through hands on experience in university coursework or through work shops at individual schools. Teachers have a positive attitude about using portfolios but perhaps lack the training to implement them effectively and confidently. Knowledge of portfolio use is becoming more widespread and today many graduate and undergraduate programs in education have as part of their curriculum a portfolio to maintain demonstrating learning

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which has taken place over the semester or even throughout the degree program. Perhaps with more training in this setting and added teacher in service training, language arts portfolios will one day replace standardized tests.

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Appendix 1

Table 1

Table 1
Questions 1 -8
Frequency Distribution

Question	SA	A	U	SD	D
1. A portfolio may be used to show achievement, build self concept and broaden the learning experience of a student.	10	20	6	1	0
2. Portfolios produce a more representative picture of a student's abilities in language arts and reading than conventional or standardized methods.	7	19	7	4	0
3. Using portfolios should increase skill levels and mastery in the language arts and reading process for students.	3	16	16	2	0
4. Students would develop a more positive attitude about writing and reading by developing an individual portfolio of their own work.	9	19	7	2	0
5. Standardized tests and achievement tests are the primary way used to measure reading skills in my class.	2	14	2	17	2
6. I primarily use tests furnished by the reading text publisher and my own tests.	8	20	0	7	1
7. I find it difficult to assign grades to portfolios.	2	15	11	9	0
8. There needs to be more teacher training to explain how portfolios work and how they may benefit students.	20	13	4	0	0
9. Are you currently using portfolio analysis and assessment in the evaluation of language arts and reading skills?	YES			NO	
	9 (24.3%)			28 (75.7%)	

Appendix 2

Questionnaire

QUESTIONNAIRE

DIRECTIONS: Please read each statement and circle the response that most closely represents how you feel about the statement, either strongly agree, agree, undecided, disagree or strongly disagree and include a brief response to the open ended questions.

1.	A portfolio may be used to show achievements, build self concept and broaden the learning experience of a student.	**SA A U D SD**
2.	Portfolios produce a more representative picture of a student's abilities in language arts and reading than conventional or standardized methods.	**SA A U D SD**
3.	Using portfolios should increase skill levels and mastery in the language arts and reading process for students.	**SA A U D SD**
4.	Students would develop a more positive attitude about writing and reading by developing an individual portfolio of their own work.	**SA A U D SD**
5.	Standardized tests and achievement tests are the primary way used to measure reading skills in my class.	**SA A U D SD**
6.	I primarily use tests furnished by the reading text publisher and my own tests.	**SA A U D SD**
7.	I find it difficult to assign grades to portfolios.	**SA A U D SD**
8.	There needs to be more teacher training to explain how portfolios work and how they may benefit students.	**SA A U D SD**
9.	Are you currently using portfolio analysis and assessment in the evaluation of language arts and reading skills?	**YES NO**
10.	In your view, what items should a student portfolio contain?	
11.	What training have you had in the use of portfolios?	
12.	What problems do you foresee if you used student portfolios in your classroom?	
13.	How many years of teaching experience do you have?_____	
14.	What is your highest level of education completed? _____	

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